

Listening & Discerning on the Way

Discernment in the New Testament

The word 'discernment' does not occur often in English translations of the Bible. In the NRSV translation of the New Testament, for example, there are seven uses of the root 'discern' in one form or other, six in Paul's letters to the Corinthians, and the other, perhaps the best known, in chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans. The word 'mission' occurs only once in the NRSV. Scripture is not a 'how-to textbook' for mission or for discernment, or for how to govern the Church. In these crucial areas – how we engage with the world around us, how we order the Church, how we discern God's direction for us, Christian faith has from its earliest years recognised the importance of being attentive to our time and place, to culture and setting. In all of these, responsiveness to the Spirit in the context in which we are set is the vital thing.

Few would deny that the whole thrust of the NT's account of following Jesus, of life in Christ, requires a capacity to recognise God's direction, and that this capacity is part of the gift that is the good news. The ability to discern God's guidance is given to us, it is not a result of our own effort. This is a faculty strongly associated with the Spirit of God, as it was in the life of God's people prior to the coming of Jesus. The practice of discernment in biblical terms is closely bound up with life in the Holy Spirit.

A natural place to turn is the gospels and their account of Jesus' ministry. How did he discern the Father's will? '...the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing, for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.' (John 5:19). As John V. Taylor comments, 'He knew only God and everything in God and God in all. And for him to live was to respond joyfully to that God and to do whatever at that moment perfectly reflected his Father's nature.' Jesus resembles to some extent the many other biblical leaders, prophets and others, both before and after him, who are reported as hearing clearly the voice of God directing them; we might see him as having this capacity in its most concentrated form. One of the most attractive features of Jesus as the gospel-writers present him is his spontaneous freedom.

We have to reckon with the reality that for most of us, the sense of direct and unmediated communication with the Father that Jesus implies is seriously impaired. Indeed, we are liable to treat with considerable suspicion those who claim to have heard something straight from God; and that chimes with the notion of 'testing' – or discerning – that is often present in NT letters: 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.' (1 John 4:1). Similarly, Paul writes of the gift of 'the discernment of spirits' (1 Cor 12:10).

If Jesus gives us a pattern for Spirit-filled discernment that we can hold before us as a goal, but which we know we fall short of, the Acts of the Apostles might be the best place to turn for a picture – not a complete one but a 'good enough' one – of how the first disciples begin to find God's way. Let us consider some aspects of the section from chapters 9-15:

By no means do we leave behind the biblical insistence on God's direct speech and action in the lives of those whom God calls. The two central directing moments in the dissemination of the gospel are the call of Saul on the Damascus road, and the vision of Peter leading him to Cornelius. Each of these are transforming interventions which the two saints have to make their own, to live out. But each requires also matching discernment on behalf of others, requires a sort of 'testing'. In the case of Paul's conversion, Ananias is given the word that overcomes his fear (described as a direct conversation with the Lord, though we tend to marvel at his courage, recognising that God does not efface his humanity); and then in Jerusalem, Barnabas takes the lead in allowing the frightened disciples to recognise God at work through Paul. He and they have to discern the genuineness of the Spirit's work in Paul, which must at first have been a risky business.

In the case of Peter and Cornelius, there is a coming together of vision and context: 'While Peter was still thinking about the vision [still 'greatly puzzled', v.16], the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down and go with them..."' (10:19f.) Peter's interpretation of what God is saying to him inwardly is worked out in correlation with what is happening around him. Next, the great new thing that he has discerned, 'God shows no partiality', has to be brought to the assembled believers in Jerusalem, heard and tested. 'When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God...' (11:18).

In amongst these descriptions of the faithful responding to remarkable words and actions of God, there is also account of more mundane decision making: 'News... came to the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch' (11:22) 'The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief...' (11:29); 'Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church [in Jerusalem], decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch...' (15:22). We are not told exactly how they came to these decisions. On one occasion as they take the next step in responding to what God seems to be doing, we are given a little more detail about their processes of discernment: 'While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."' (13:2).

We are also given a glimpse – strangely comforting, perhaps! – of differences of

discernment, in the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul with regard to John Mark as a companion (15:37-41), leading to a separation of ways and gospel journeys in different directions, Cyprus and Syria/Cilicia. We are told that the believers commended Paul to the grace of the Lord (v.40), but nothing about their attitude towards Barnabas and Mark as they sailed away to Cyprus.

Before that, the central episode in discerning the direction of the Church happens at the Council of Jerusalem. Here (15:1-21), there is another difference of discernment, between those who hold to the importance of circumcision and the law of Moses, and those who have begun to experience the conversion of Gentiles. There is a meeting 'together to consider this matter' (v.6), and there is 'much debate' (v.7). Leaders - Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and James - speak. The conclusion is voiced by James, though the strong impression is that this is a collective decision not to trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God. James quotes Scripture, from three different prophets, to recognise that there is precedent for other peoples seeking the Lord. Again there is a bringing together of their experience, of the way the Spirit has been seen to be working, with the tradition (which itself has to be interpreted – other, more exclusive texts could have been chosen).

As the Council ends and plans action to follow up that conclusion, we read that most fascinating clause, 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...' (15:28); how the Council reached this perception of what is good is not revealed in detail, but the phrase implies the kind of mutual attention to the Spirit's working, in a particular context, leading to a plan of action, that our current exercise in shared discernment intends.

We made mention at the start of Romans 12:2. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect.' It is important here – something often overlooked in the NT in modern English, which has no distinction between singular and plural for the second person – to note that the 'you' who are to discern is plural.

The discernment of the will of God that flows from the transformation of renewed minds is a shared thing, is the task of the body of Christ together. One aspect of Paul's way of thinking about life in Christ as it is captured in the 'body' imagery, as elsewhere, is that there is a listening to each other expected, a mutual attentiveness of members to the constituent parts and thus to the whole.

This corporate nature of discernment, and the way it requires bringing together perception of what God is already beginning to do with our interpretation of our inheritance of faith –

attentiveness to the world around us and to our own resources in Scripture and history – is noteworthy.

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Director of IME 2